



# Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America

*Laura Wexler*

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July 25, 1946. In Walton County, Georgia, a mob of white men commit one of the most heinous racial crimes in America's history: the shotgun murder of four black sharecroppers -- two men and two women -- at Moore's Ford Bridge. *Fire in a Canebrake*, the term locals used to describe the sound of the fatal gunshots, is the story of our nation's last mass lynching on record. More than a half century later, the lynchers' identities still remain unknown.

Drawing from interviews, archival sources, and uncensored FBI reports, acclaimed journalist and author Laura Wexler takes readers deep into the heart of Walton County, bringing to life the characters who inhabited that infamous landscape -- from sheriffs to white supremacists to the victims themselves -- including a white man who claims to have been a secret witness to the crime. By turns a powerful historical document, a murder mystery, and a cautionary tale, *Fire in a Canebrake* ignites a powerful contemplation on race, humanity, history, and the epic struggle for truth.

## **Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America Details**

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# From Reader Review **Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America** for online ebook

## **Michael says**

This is a book about the last mass lynching in America. I always thought the word "lynching" meant that people were hung, a.k.a. lynched. But apparently it refers to any killing performed by a group that was racially motivated. Not a book that will make you feel warm and fuzzy inside. It is a very good book though. Well written, not an excessive amount of information, which some true crime books produce. It's pretty much to the point, and keeps you interested. Doesn't spend too much time on any particular part of the story so it flows along nicely. If you enjoy true crime I think you would be happy to add this book to your collection. Even if you are not a fan of true crime or history, this is a good book. So if you would like to try something different, I don't think you'll be disappointed.

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## **Andrea says**

I am almost embarrassed that I knew so little of the information presented in this book. Built around a shocking event in 1946 in rural Georgia, the author uses the last group lynching in the U.S. to explore the way race and culture interacted throughout much of the South for decades after the end of slavery. Like many people, I thought of lynching primarily in terms of the method or means of killing rather than what is legally a murder but sanctioned or even condoned by the community. To this day, the identities of the men involved in killing two men and their wives are unknown due to a culture of silence and protection. The event itself is pretty straight forward, but the author paints a wider picture of politics, economics, and everyday life for sharecropper families. Tying in the larger national politics of the day, the author also explores the role of the Federal government and organizations like the NAACP in changing the laws and how they are enforced. An excellent educational read and well worth the time to read.

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## **Christa says**

That this book was published in 2003 is all the more poignant for its coverage of issues affecting the United States even today: from the state's voting system in 1946, in which rural counties carried more electoral weight than urban counties, to the tensions between black and white that persisted decades after the lynching, and were grounded in decades before.

Having additionally read Langston Hughes' "The Ways of White Folk" (written in the early 20th century) and Thomas Mullen's "Darktown" -- set in the same general region in the same general period -- it became notable how this book of nonfiction echoed those works of fiction. Perhaps the best way to sum this book up comes from author Laura Wexler's note at the end:

"For many black people, the lynching was the most horrific thing that ever happened in Walton or Oconee counties, but for many white people, it was mainly an annoyance, an event that smudged the area's good name.

"The segregated memories of the Moore's Ford lynching are the precursors to the divisive reactions to the

Rodney King beating and the O.J. trial and the dragging of James Byrd Jr. And the segregated memories of the Moore's Ford lynching reveal something basic: The only way for blacks and whites to live together peacefully in America in the twenty-first century is if we begin struggling to understand and acknowledge the extent to which racism has destroyed -- and continues to destroy -- our ability to tell a common truth."

Even being not a well known book, it remains an important one to read to help further understand the full extent and history of race relations in the US.

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## **Julie says**

July 25, 1946, is a day that forever changed the lives and history of Walton County, Georgia. I wasn't even a glimmer in my parents' eyes on this day as they would not be born until 1951 and 1955. However, I feel a connection to this event in a small way.

On this fateful day, I'm sure that Roger and Dorothy Malcom and George and Mae Murray Dorsey had no idea what would happen to them as they climbed into Loy Harrison's car to travel back to the farm from the jailhouse in Monroe. Loy had just bailed Roger out of jail after being cleared of murder charges when Barrett Hester recovered from his stab wound. Roger would have to work off the bail paid by Loy by working on his farm. Totally acceptable to him! Needless to say, they never made it past Moore's Ford Bridge before being ambushed. The Malcom's and the Dorsey's lives would end at the bridge when they were lynched. The reason? No one really knows for sure but one could surmise it's because they were black. Roger had attempted to murder Mr. Hester over comments made concerning him and some white girls.

I am drawn to this story because I now teach school in Walton County. I have always wondered what was causing the racial tension I was witnessing. It was more than I've seen in other places, such as my hometown. I read this book on the recommendation of a teacher friend, Susan, who stated that "this should be a required read for anyone living in the south not raised here."

I was born in a small town in Illinois in the 1970's. I have seen KKK cross burnings and witnessed first hand the hatred that my community had for people of different races. In 1994, while working at Dairy Queen, we had a black family travel through town looking for a meal. When my co-workers saw them get out of the car, they started turning lights off and moving away from the public eye in the hopes that this family would "get the hint" that they were not welcome. My parents taught me well to respect people of all races, colors, sizes, etc and I took the high road that day to make sure this family felt welcome. I waited on them, cooked their food, and delivered it to their table while my co-workers cowered in the back room of the store in fear of what these people might do. We didn't have any other customers while they were there either, which I could not understand. Looking back now, I realize just how racist my hometown was, and still is. It has "grown up" a little and now it is more diverse but when I graduated high school in 1995, I had never been to school with a person of another race. I left that small town in the fall of 1995 and moved to Arkansas to go to nursing school. All of a sudden, I was surrounded by people of all different cultures, races, and backgrounds. I'm thankful my parents taught me so well. They said to treat others as I wanted to be treated, which is what I did. Many of my friends now do not look like me at all and they have taught me a lot about their various backgrounds and beliefs.

My students are amazed to hear my story and how recent I experienced some of these things. I've lived in a neighboring GA county for 10 years now after leaving Arkansas. Some of those students are ancestors to the people involved in the lynching of 1946. I wish the details of the lynching weren't such a mystery. Maybe the

people of Walton County could have more trust in each other if they only knew. I fear that if this mystery is ever solved, however, that tensions will heighten once more. In recent years, some have come forward with information. However, the FBI has found it to be conflicting with testimony of 1946. Are people coming forward with information for the fame and glory or do they finally want to put this story to rest?

I can't say that I "enjoyed" this book because it's not meant to be enjoyed. I found myself totally engrossed in the twists and turns, wanting to drive the routes mentioned (I only know where a few are and have not ever been to Moore's Ford Bridge. I would like to go just to see it, to get a glimpse of what it might have been like that day for those involved). I do pass the old cotton mill and some of the lesser mentioned places and doing so today gave it a rather nostalgic feel. Do I feel different about Walton County knowing all of this? Yes and no. I have a greater appreciation for the events that happened. I have a better understanding of some of my students and their families. I have a desire for people to find a more cohesive sense of community within themselves and to be more accepting of others, like them or not. My personal feelings of the people in the community have not changed just from reading this book.

One thing about this book that really stood out, literally, from the beginning, is the use of the picture in the front of this book. It is of the lynching victims in the funeral home. There were no fancy caskets or mounds of flowers everywhere. It is a picture of the mourners looking over the bodies of the Dorsey's and Murray's. It's graphic. It's sad. It's sickening. It shows so much though in the ways that blacks were treated differently. No way would the picture have even been taken had it been four white victims.

I also did not know what "canebrake" looked like or even it's purpose. However, the title implies a "fire in a canebrake." Witnesses would say that this is what the lynching sounded like. To see what canebrake looks like (for those of you like me who simply didn't know), here is a picture:

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/images/...>

To date, many federal and state laws have been passed in regards to Constitutional Rights, especially after this event. However, there is no law prohibiting lynching, which I think is a shame. There were other lynchings to take place after this one, but none since this one have been this large. In 1946, this made national news that even involved then President Truman issuing orders to the FBI during the investigation. People still flock to the site of Moore's Ford in an attempt to find evidence that might bring this story to rest. They still interview people about the events, much like Laura Wexler did in writing this story. Many of the people there in 1946 have since passed on and left their stories and legacies to family members, who may or may not know what to do with the information. The fear of passing along information is still there so this mystery may never see itself resolved. I only hope the efforts by the Moore's Ford Memorial Committee have brought about some peace to the communities in Walton County.

To read the first two chapters and to see pictures of the area (no graphic pictures...just those of tombstones and of the original site plus new bridge) please visit the author's website at [www.fireinacanebrake.com](http://www.fireinacanebrake.com)

I purchased this book from Amazon.com on the recommendation of Susan.

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**~Nadia~♥when you've suffered a great deal in life, each additional pain is both unbearable and trifling♥~ says**

**Rating:N/A**

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## Stacia says

I'd recommend this one to anyone interested in race relations, civil rights, etc.... I see it as an important piece of US history regarding racial hate. The book provides a lot of info about elections/voting, political lobbying to try to enact federal anti-lynching laws, state & federal justice systems during those time periods, as well as the beginnings of civil rights advances under President Truman. I also learned that lynchings are not just by rope (I always thought of them that way), but are any kind of vigilante killing by a group/mob. (In this case, the four victims were killed by being shot.) I also learned that as of 2003 (when the book came out), there has never been a federal anti-lynching law that was passed. (Apparently, in 2005, the Senate passed a resolution expressing remorse that they never did pass a federal anti-lynching law.)

In retrospect, I should have used post-its to mark pages as there were things I wanted to remember or comment on & now have no idea where they are in the book.

I'm going to try to flip through & pull out a couple of pieces...

In 1946 Eugene Talmadge & James Carmichael were running against each other for the Governor's seat. At that time, Georgia had a "county unit" system not too unlike the electoral college. So, even though Carmichael (the less conservative of the two men) won the popular vote by more than 16k votes, Talmadge (basically a white supremacist) won the actual post because of the "county unit" system.

Apparently, after lynchings, it was quite popular for crowds to show up to look for lynching souvenirs... pieces of rope or bullets, body parts, clothing, anything. Taking photos was also popular (especially if the bodies were still there, which was fortunately not the case here as they had been picked up by a funeral home the evening it happened).

"On this Friday morning in 1946, there was no chance of collecting a finger, a penis, or even a photograph of the lynching victims' battered bodies, as they'd been transported to Monroe late the evening before. Yet the souvenir collectors came nonetheless, fueled by the hope of finding a memento or a talisman, anything that could connect them to what they saw as the excitement and drama -- if not the horror -- of the quadruple murder."

and

"What they didn't consider, however, was that the men who'd killed Roger and Dorothy Malcolm, and George and Mae Murray Dorsey, had committed a murder so extreme that it would become an icon of postwar violence, a symbol of the chasm between the promise of democracy and the reality of life for black people in America in 1946. What they couldn't predict was that the men who fired the shots at Moore's Ford had made history; the nation would never again see as many victims lynched on a single day after July 25, 1946."

During the funerals for the four victims, few attended, many out of fear of reprisal for attending or for 'seeming to know or consort with' those who had been killed. George & Mae Murray Dorsey were siblings & their mom missed their funeral because she couldn't easily find a ride for hours (others were too scared to

take her -- one man had anticipated he'd be asked for a ride so he "broke" his car himself prior to being asked; another man agreed, then went & got so drunk that he couldn't drive, thereby giving himself an "out" also).

The FBI investigated & a federal grand jury was even convened (even though there was no federal anti-lynching law, there was so much national attention on this case that the FBI was trying to get info & a case based on some more "minor" federal offenses), but the case remains unsolved to this day due to the wall of silence by so many in Walton county -- those guilty, complicit, or too scared/dependent on staying in the community to talk.

"The efforts of the federal government, ultimately, were no match for a jury selected from a white community that didn't view attacks on black people as crimes. That had been proven with the Verners' trials, as it had been proven one month before in Greenville, South Carolina, when a local jury had found thirty-one white men charged with lynching a black man named Willie Earle not guilty -- even though twenty-six of those men had admitted to the FBI that they'd been members of the lynch mob."

As far as furthering the national conversation about civil rights...

"The crime had now gone unpunished. And yet Walter White and his liberal allies took comfort, because nearly four weeks after the federal government failed to win convictions against the Verner brothers, an American president addressed the NAACP's annual conference for the first time in history. "I should like to talk to you about civil rights and human freedom," President Truman said as he stood at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial on June 29, 1947."

and

"Four months after Truman's June address to the NAACP, the President's Committee on Civil Rights issued a report containing nearly three dozen recommendations for improving the state of civil rights in America. When, on February 2, 1948, President Truman sent a special message to Congress asking it to enact several of the report's recommendations, he became the first American president to put civil rights at the forefront of the national agenda."

From the Author's Note at the end of the book...

"My conversations with the white people who did consent to being interviewed were essential to my understanding of the lynching -- less for the information they supplied than for the way they revealed how segregated the memory of the Moore's Ford lynching remains. This segregation is evident in the opposing beliefs about the lynching's victims and villains, and about its very causation. But it's evident most starkly in the different meanings and significances attributed to the lynching. For many black people, the lynching was the most horrific thing that ever happened in Walton or Oconee counties, but for many white people, it was mainly an annoyance, an event that smudged the area's good name."

and

"And the segregated memories of the Moore's Ford lynching reveal something basic: The only way for blacks and whites to live together peacefully in America in the twenty-first century is if we begin struggling to understand and acknowledge the extent to which racism has destroyed -- and continues to destroy -- our ability to tell a common truth.

When I began this project, I had hoped to solve the murders, hoped for prosecution of the lynchers. But now, after years of investigation, I believe we'll never know who fired the shots in the clearing near the Moore's Ford Bridge on July 25, 1946. And I wonder if that unanswered question, that hole where the center should be, isn't the truest representation of race in America."

Wise & still accurate words, I think, 15 years after this book was published.

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### **Tracy Gold says**

"Fire in a Canebrake" is heartbreaking, page turning, and infuriating (in the way it's supposed to be). It's a deep dive into racial injustice and racial violence in America's not-too-distant past through the lens of the individual politicians, perpetrators, victims, and community members of a mass lynching in 1946. Each individual becomes fully human in Wexler's hands as complex motivations and differing accounts of the same events are investigated. I highly recommend "Fire in a Canebrake" on its own merits, but also for anyone who wants a historical background against which to consider recent racial violence.

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### **Rainey says**

A challenging and intense read about the atrocities committed right down the road in Walton County, Georgia in 1946- the last mass lynching in America. Wexler skillfully details the particulars leading up to this unsolved true crime event in a way that keeps the reader's attention while eliciting an emotional connection to the victims.

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### **Crystal says**

Like Wexler's comment at the end- you can see our racism and how we are divided even in how we remember our recent past. Shocking and sad. This book really helped me distinguish lynching as a community act- in that it is sanctioned by the community. Even if the act was committed by only 12-20 men, they are protected by everyone in the community- for generations, either out of fear or respect. To this day, no one has been convicted of this crime. It seems like this lynching, this hatred is such a deep rooted evil. Is it possible to rid of it by forgetting about it?

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### **Melissa says**

I had to read this book for my history class sophomore year of college. History isn't exactly my favorite



subject but this book intrigued me. The more I read it, the more I loved it, the less I wanted to put it down. The stories that I found in these pages make my heart ache. A part of me is ashamed that America was once like this, and at times still is. This book really opened my eyes to the history of this country, to what the former slaves had to go through once they were finally freed. I really wish I had read this book earlier in my academic career, maybe I would have been more interested in history.

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### **Chelle says**

This author was diligent to include only the details she could confirm and was careful to put statements into context. It is the story of the last mass lynching in the US which occurred in 1946. The social constraints on the community where this occurred are well described. It caused me to shudder and feel the weight of the work we have yet to do on racial/social/economic equality.

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### **Jan says**

The worst thing about this book is how easy it is to see the parallels between how racists behave today, and how they behaved 70 years ago, when they were still lynching people. Some of the quotes from the townspeople were almost word-for-word the same as quotes I hear racists spouting today. It was incredibly disheartening.

As to the book itself, it's interesting, well-researched, and informative. I thought the writing was fairly engaging. Difficult topic though.

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### **Mocha Girl says**

he term, "Fire in a Canebrake", is a phrase that Walton County, Georgia residents used to describe the sounds of the fatal gunshots that commenced the last mass lynching in America; it is also the title of Laura Wexler's historical account of the Moore's Ford lynching where four blacks were murdered in late July 1946. The novel painstakingly details the "who, what, when, where and why" of the horrific crime and is supported by interviews, FBI reports, and other detailed documentation.

Wexler takes us back to the beginning when a black man, Roger Malcolm, stabs a white man, Barnett Hester, for allegedly having an affair with his common law wife, Dorothy. As Barnett lingers near death, Roger sits in jail counting his days left on earth. Eleven days later when Barnett recovers, Roger is then set free when his bail is posted by Loy Harrison, a wealthy landowner and landlord to George Dorsey (Dorothy's older brother) and his common law wife, Mae Murray. It is returning home from the jail that Roger, Dorothy, George, and Mae are dragged from Loy's car by an angry mob of white men and are murdered in cold blood. Loy claims he did not and could not recognize any of the attackers which was why his life was spared on that fateful day....and so the lying begins and never seems to end.

For years, the NAACP, FBI, Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), and local law enforcement conduct their investigations, interrogations, and examinations only to arrive at no convictions. It is only in 1991, when an "eyewitness" steps forward to tell his story that there appears to be a slither of hope for justice. However, hope fades as holes and contradictions run rampant in his testimony as well; and unfortunately by the early 1990's all of the suspected perpetrators and potential corroborating witnesses are deceased. It appears that the

leads had literally died out and one wonders if justice will ever be served.

The author does an excellent job of "peeling back the layers" to set the stage for the story and expertly blends in the national and state political agendas that influenced the course of events surrounding the lynching. By doing so, the reader understands the history of the rural Georgian townships where the story plays out, the role of the key witnesses including their family and criminal backgrounds, public displays of bigotry and drunkenness. She also shares the political tactics of the day used to deny blacks of their Civil Rights and protection under Federal law, numerous contradictions in the witness's statements/alibis/affidavits, and lack of follow-up and missed opportunities by law officials. The handling of the case by the investigators from beginning to end is totally unbelievable by today's standards, but what is moreso shocking is the blatant racism, hatred, and wantonness of the townsfolk toward an atrocity such as this.

This reader ran a myriad of emotions while reading the novel -- first, frustration in that no perpetrators were ever brought to justice and nor was anyone ever held accountable for these heinous crimes -- a fact that is unfortunately recurrent in so many lynching cases. Secondly, anger and sadness when reading about the intimidation and threats against local blacks as well as the breakdown and separation of the victim's families in the aftermath of the lynching. The murders only exacerbated their wretched existence as poor, undereducated sharecroppers. The author's skill in conveying their daily living conditions and lifestyle using census statistics and first hand accounts was outstanding and heartbreaking.

This book is a page-turner! Although Oprah, Dateline, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution have covered this story, Wexler adds a twist: her words breathe life into the pages and add color to the black and white photos in the book; she presents the evidence in such a way to allow readers to draw their own conclusions. Hats off to Ms. Wexler for her perseverance and dedication to finding truth. Well done!

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### **Sandra says**

Les esperaban en el puente Moore's Ford, en Monroe, Atlanta. Primero sacaron a los hombres y los unieron con una soga atada a las manos. Lo de las mujeres lo decidieron después. Colocaron a los cuatro en fila y dispararon una y otra vez. El sonido era como el de un incendio en un cañaveral, por los chasquidos. 25 de Julio de 1946.

Nadie logró resolver el caso, ningún sospechoso se demostró como culpable y nadie pudo encarcelarlos. Ni Truman, ni los movimientos por los derechos civiles, ni el FBI. Los linchamientos no son considerados como delito federal en los Estados Unidos. Los blancos del sur consideraban el castigo a sus negros como un derecho heredado, no como un crimen.

El relato de Laura Wexler es buen periodismo: su opinión no importa, su voz no se oye, solo leemos los hechos, el contexto y los recuerdos de los testigos.

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### **Andrew says**

A haphazard decision to buy this book from the local Savers turns into one of the best books I've read this year. The author has a way of telling this historical atrocity that continues to haunt you long after you have turned the last page.

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